DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 876 CS 502 012

AUTHOR Bormann, Ernest G.
TITLE Critical Questions in Speech Communication: The Role of Historical Research.
PUB DATE Dec 77
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (63rd, Washington, D.C., December 1-4, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Skills; *Historiography; Opinions; *Research; Research Methodology; *Rhetorical Criticism; *Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

This document begins by discussing several conflicting opinions on the distinction between historical scholarship and rhetorical criticism. It then compares and contrasts historiography and rhetorical criticism in an attempt to define a role for historical research in the field of speech communication. Both areas of scholarship use comparable methods, but they differ as to function; each approaches the subject matter from contrasting scholarly viewpoints and provides a different explanatory structure as a result. The document concludes by citing three important areas where good historical works are needed in the field of speech communication: (1) studies of the history of speech communication, (2) integrated studies that survey the history of communication in the United States, and (3) survey histories that integrate and explain the rhetorical traditions and practices of our society. (HAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED151876

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Critical Questions in Speech Communication

The Role of Historical Research

Ernest G. Bormann

The University of Minnesota

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ernest G. Bormann

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

CS502012

In the first edition of Theory and Research in the Communicative Arts I argued that the historian and the critic both use the same tools of scholarship.[1] Both exercise the same care when investigating documents and artifacts and evaluating sources. Both must footnote factual statements and draw conclusions with the same logical rigor. Both develop a viewpoint towards a scholarly project and attempt to interpret or find a structure to explain the communication under study.

I went on to argue that since the two methods are similar in some respects they can easily be confused. Unless this confusion is sorted out early in a research project it will plague the researcher to the end of the study.

My colleague Robert L. Scott argued with me that my distinction was arbitrary and oversimplified. He could not see a distinction which made much difference. His arguments were confined to our personal discussions and tended to take place at the time of the publication of the book. Aside from that the question of the distinction between history and criticism evoked a long silence in terms of response or discussion in the pages of our journals or on our conventions until just recently.

In the meantime scholars writing humanistic works in speech-communication discussed and evaluated their work as though there were a clear distinction between history and criticism and the writing of what was called and evaluated as history waned as rhetorical criticism came to the fore as the most prestigious and important work of humanists in the field of speech communication. Indeed, when I joined the editorial staff of the Bicentennial Monograph Series we had several discussions as to the nature of the works that we would

consider for publication and decided that we would confine ourselves to works of rhetorical criticism rather than to historical monographs. Indeed, mine was one of the few voices raised in support of publishing history.

The issue has lately, however, given evidence of coming to life. Gronbeck in 1975 once again raised the question "Can one generally distinguish between the history and the criticism of rhetorical discourse?"[2] Barnet Baskerville delivered a long paper on the topic "Must We All Be 'Rhetorical Critics'?" at the SCA Convention in 1974. Baskerville's paper was published in the April 1977 issue of the Quarterly Journal of Speech.[3] To my mind Baskerville raised the question because he thought that history was different in important ways from rhetorical criticism and further, because he thought scholars in speech-communication were not giving historical studies their proper role in the discipline.

With this background I return to the issue of the Role of Historical Research in Speech-Communication.

I shall deal with two questions: first, within the tradition of humanistic scholarship how do historiography and rhetorical criticism compare and contrast? and, second, what is a useful role for historical research in our discipline? or phrased another way to what extent is historical research a tie that binds?

What then is the relationship between historiography and rhetorical criticism? In the first edition of Theory and Research in the Communicative Arts I suggested that the historian is looking at human activity to find a meaningful structure in the traces of the past which

will allow the writing of a narrative which explains the historical event. The critic's viewpoint, on the other hand, is well expressed by Malcolm Cowley's definition of criticism as "writing which deals with works of art." And finally, I argued that the critic's focus on artistry is the major difference between rhetorical criticism and history. The critic to do the job fully must make judgments about the artistic excellence of the work. The historian may say in passing that Webster was a stirring orator but the critic will explain detail in what way Webster was a great orator and why he is judged to be great. To make such evaluations, the critic must establish standards of excellence which have a certain universality and permanence.[4]

Gronbeck answered the question "Can one generally distinguish between history and criticism of rhetorical discourse?" in the affirmative. He argued that the distinction was essentially whether or not the scholar found most of the confirming materials or the proof for the argument outside the discourse or within the rhetorical artifact. History, he continued, is subject to the tests of truthfulness, criticism to tests of consnstency and insightfulness. History is descriptive-casual, criticism is evaluative-advisory.[5]

Baskerville presented a thorough review of the question of the differences, if any, between rhetorical history and rhetorical criticism. He seemed to decide that the difference is one which makes a difference and used the treatment of Ernest Wrage's writings on history as an example of the kind of difference it can make. Wrage, according to Baskerville advanced the thesis that "students of public address may contribute in substantial ways to the history of ideas." Speeches according to Wrage, "because they are pitched to levels of information,to

take account of prevalent beliefs, and to mirror tone and temper of audiences. . .serve as useful indices to the popular mind."[6] Since Wrage saw the history of public address as an important division of the practice of intellectual history, Baskerville feels that scholars who chide Wrage for being a poor or incomplete rhetorical critic or for advocating a less than useful approach to rhetorical criticism simply misunderstand that Wrage was advocating the writing of history. Baskerville implies we ought not judge historians according to the same criteria we use in evaluating rhetorical critics.

So with the wisdom of hindsight (I almost said history) and the recent bubbling controversy as background let me return again to the question of what are the similarities and differences between history and criticism of communication? I believe that much of my original argument is still sound--that is that history and criticism do differ in some important respects despite important similarities. I also continue to believe that it is important to sort out the differences. I now believe, however, that the matter is much more complicated than my original treatment of the subject indicated.

I now believe that the distinctions between historiography and criticism are matters of emphasis and approach not so clearcut that one could always make a choice as to whether or not an article was one or the other. One can find relatively pure examples of history and of criticism in the pages of our journals but often an essay will include sections of history although the predominate focus and purpose of the author is critical. Likewise I believe that an essay might contain sections of criticism although the main purpose is historical explanation. My original point was that an essay ought to be designed

for either a critical or a historical purpose and if the essay was to be one of rhetorical criticism the historical sections ought to be supportive of the critical analysis and subordinate to it.

In longer works such as monographs and books I believe a scholar might write both a history and criticism by alternating sections which document the presence of a body of discourse, accounting for its rise and influence and demise with some explanatory structure of the historical type and then submitting the discourse so documented to critical analysis.

To sum up my answer to the question, How does historiography and rhetorical criticism compare and contrast? They use comparable scholarly methods in discovering and testing sources and in establishing and proving their case. They approach their studies with contrasting scholarly viewpoints and tend to provide contrasting explanatory structures as a result. They differ as to the function and use of the resulting scholarship.

By a historical viewpoint I mean the scholars' cluster of assumptions about what is the important stuff of history. A historian's viewpoint might include a mixture of such notions as great personalities bend the course of history, money makes the world go round, and the words speak louder than actions. By critical viewpoint I mean the scholar's cluster of assumptions about what is the important stuff of rhetorical analysis and what makes rhetoric work. A critic's viewpoint might include a mixture of such notions as rhetoric is a reflection of more basic historical forces (the situation is controlling), or that rhetoric generates self fulfilling prophecies, or that rhetoric and other features of experience act in a reciprocal relationship. The critical viewpoint

might include some assumption about the artistic nature of communication, about the ethical canons to be used in evaluating discourse, about the importance of discovering how discourse functions persuasively, to create a sense of community, or to deal with historical change, about the criteria to use in evaluating the rhetorical strengths or weaknesses of the discourse. The critic's viewpoint will also include some general assumptions relating to the techniques of criticism. How important is the rational side of the discourse, the argumentative structure, logical consistency, soundness of premises? How important is the dramatic dimension, the mythic foundations, the poetic strain? The critic's viewpoint might include elements of a "school" of rhetorical criticism.

The next two papers will deal in detail with questions relating to the historians viewpoint. Gronbeck will consider some of the basic questions relating to the unfolding of the historical record. Turner discusses the assumptions of historians who decide to write about contemporaneous events. Let them serve as extended examples of what I have in mind by the term.

What are the types of explanatory structures which characterize rhetorical history? One common structural type is the tracing of the lineage of rhetorical theory or practice. Thus, a historian might trace the teaching practices in American departments of speech communication back through the content of public speaking courses, to the teaching of rhetoric in 19th century literary institutions, and on back to the influence of Aristotle. Another common structural type is to discover historical periods or epochs. Thus a historian might portray the history of political persuasion in North America in terms of a period of nation building, a period of conflict

management, and a period of display. Another historical structure common in explaining artistic practices is to discover and define artistic schools or traditions based upon works which fall into similar patterns according to artistic criteria. Thus a historian might discuss the Southern Fire-Eating school of oratory or the Agrarian School of Barnyard Vituperation, and so forth. A historian might provide a structure relating to stylistic typologies such as discourse which exhibits a grand style, a sentimental style, a genteel style, the ghostwriting committee style, and so forth.

The rhetorical critic generally starts with a structure which suggests standards for criteria for evaluating the communication, a selective discription of the elements in the discourse relating to the criteria, the application of the criteria to the discourse and a final set of evaluations or judgments.

History and criticism differ, perhaps most profoundly, in their function or use. Criticism often seems to have a much clearer practical application and use than history and that might help account for its growing popularity through the decade of the 1960s when relevance was a key concept for many of us in speech-communication.

The process of criticism serves an integral and necessary function in the maintenance of the daily communication of any culture. The children who are born into and the newcomers who join a community must be taught the rules and norms of the communication transactions that sustain the group. The coaching procedure by which newcomers come to learn how to communicate is largely based on positive modeling and criticism. For example, the beginner in interpersonal communication transactions takes part in communication episodes or exercises and then has the communication critically evaluated in terms of authenticity,

game playing, honesty, skills of self-discourse, ability to manage conflict, and so forth. The beginner in public speaking gives speeches and then has the communication critically evaluated in terms of content, organization, delivery, language, and so forth.

Rhetorical criticism may move to the broader arena of public communication and apply the same sort of critical analysis that the teacher-coach provides the neophyte to the practice of the most mature and important speakers and communicators in highly significant communication contexts. Thus, a critic might examine the television addresses of the President according to the critical canons of the public speaking communication style or a critic might evaluate the debates between Presidential candidates according to the same critical standards that one might use to help neophytes learn intercollegiate debating.

Criticism which moves from the day-to-day evaluation essential to ordinary communication to the scholarly level of criticism of important communication events functions as social criticism. The critic's viewpoint includes the assumption that good communication is essentially to the public welfare. The critic often selects a communication event which is, in the critic's opinion, especially praiseworthy or deserving of blame. On other occasions the critic may submit certain general communication practices to critical evaluation in order to discover the way the communication creates or sustains biases, prejudices, and other injustices. The critic might examine the sexist nature of language in textbooks, the racist slant of magazine articles, the economic elitism of television advertising. The criticism of social communication serves practical

and important purposes for any culture but such criticism is likely to lose its usefulness when the discourse which brought it into being fades from the scene.

Another kind of rhetorical criticism aims at discovering knowledge about communication which transcends communication styles and contexts. Rhetorical critics studying communication in this way are trying to understand the phenemonon in all its varied forms but particularly as it is used rhetorically. Rhetorical criticism thus takes its place as a liberal and humanizing art, a scholarly endeavor which aims to illuminate the human condition. The critic has such concerns as the way human symbolizing works to divide and integrate social arrangements, to interprete human problems, to enable cooperative efforts to solve them, and to provide self and group concepts for human beings searching for meaning for themselves, their groups, and their endeavors. In Karlyn Campbell's words, "The academic critic explores and analyzes whatever acts will aid in explicating the essential process of human symbolizing."[7]

By contrast, what are the purposes and uses of history in the field of speech-communication?

I have examined a number of suggested uses for history--to discover the laws or tendencies in the unfolding process of history--to learn from the mistakes of the past (she who is ignorant of history is doomed to repeat it)--to discover <u>wie es eigentlich gewesen war</u> (to find out what really happened)--all of these I have discarded.

I am left with the notion that history is power. I am a follower of Carl Becker's notion that any social collective whether it is a pair of human beings joined together for a significant period of time, a small group, an organization, a movement, a community, or a

nation requires a collective memory--that without a collective memory there is no cohesion, no sense of groupness, no possibility for cooperation. I also believe that the collective memory provides a sense of meaning and purpose and that like the person who loses his memory the group that loses its memory does not know who they are or what they want or where they are going. I return again to the aphorism of George Orwell in 1984--those who control the present control the past and those who control the past control the future. That being the case I argue that whether or not the graduate student in speech-communication who is caught up in a study of feminist rhetoric or sexist communication in the 1970s has a memory of Frances Wright, Angelin and Sarah Grimke', Abby Kelly, Elizabeth Cady Standon and those strange wild husbands like Angelina's Theodore Weld, Elizabeth Cady's Henry B. Stanton and Abby Kelly's Steven Symonds Foster makes a considerable difference for the future. Just as the graduate students in the 1960s who were caught up in radical rhetoric and refused to study the history of the old loft of the decades from the 1920s to the 1950s had a different future than those who did.

The humanistic scholars in speech communication have three important areas where good historical works are desperately needed.

First we need studies of the history of our own community. We have the Wallace volume on the History of Speech Education but it is a symposium of essays.[8] We need the spadework which eventually results in an integrated survey of the history of our discipline. When we have such a scholarly history to supplement our current legends and rhetorical fantasies we will better know whether or not we have a future and what sort of future it is to be.

We will also discover whether we are a community, a discipline, or a collective of baronies with drawbridges across our moats which we drop once a year to collect in convention.

Second, we need integrated studies which survey the history of communication in our country (the world for that matter) for all those who wish to study communication no matter what their special interest or commitment to research methodology might be. Too bad we did not have a good survey history of persuasion in America which students of attitude-change could have read before they embarked on studies of such variables as fear arousal, two-sided argument and so forth. Had they known of Jonathan Edwards' use of fear arousal and how its use varied over the years, had they known the use of the two-sided argument by the Finneyites in the 1830s and how its use rose and fell in our history, they would have been wiser about selecting such variables for scientific investigation. Too bad we do not have a good survey history of the use of small group communication for consciousness raising. We would have been in a better position to know where we were and wither we were tending with the outburst of small group activity in the 1960s if we had some history about the Methodist class meetings and love feasts, the self-criticism sessions at the Oneida Colony, and the parlour meetings of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society.

Third, the entire scholarly community as well as the general public would benefit from survey histories which integrate and explain the rhetorical traditions and practices of our society. A domain vital to our collective memory as a culture lies largely uncharted by scholarship. A few historians have provided such works as Marvin Meyers, The Jacksonian Persuasion.[9] We have some sound

historical monographs written by scholars in speech communication. Robert T. Oliver in The History of Public Speaking in America[10] mapped the territory and indicated its diversity but we have as yet but sketched the history of communication in our society, one which, ironically, has as a major cultural preoccupation communication.

Footnotes

[1](New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).

[2]Bruce E. Gronbeck, "Rhetorical History and Rhetorical Criticism: A Distinction," Speech Teacher, 24 (1975), 309-320.

[3]Barnett Baskerville, "Must We All Be 'Rhetorical Critics?", Quarterly Journal of Speech, 63 (1977), 107-116.

[4]Bormann, pp. 227-330.

[5]Gronbeck, pp. 310-311.

[6]Baskerville, p. 109.

[7]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Criticism: Ephemeral and Enduring," Speech Teacher, 23 (1974), 9-14.

[8]Karl Wallace, ed. History of Speech Education in America (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954).

[9](Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1960).

[10](Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1965).